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SUBJECT: FREEDOM AGENDA: MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT SPEAK OUT ON
ELECTORAL REFORM DURING AMBASSADOR'S RAMADAN DIWANIYA CALLS

REF: A. KUWAIT 4314

[B](#). KUWAIT 4293

[C](#). KUWAIT 3178

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary and comment: During his nightly courtesy visits to diwanis during Ramadan, which began October 4, the Ambassador has been asking National Assembly members (MPs) and political activists their views on reducing the number of electoral districts, a key component of political reform in Kuwait (ref. A and B). Moderate Shi'a MP Dr. Yousef Al-Zalzal expressed concern the reduction could disadvantage Kuwait's Shi'a minority, which represents nearly a third of the population. Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee MP Mohammed Al-Sager said he preferred five districts to ten, but doubted whether any reduction proposal would be approved by the National Assembly without strong Government support, which he stated is currently lacking. (Note: There are 25 districts under the current electoral system; two MPs are elected from each district. End note.) Liberal, independent MP Jamal Al-Omar said he opposed the reduction, arguing that Islamists would benefit most from the reform. Although differing on specific aspects of the reform, most MPs agreed the Government was not doing enough to push for a reduction in the number of districts, and many doubted the Government's commitment to implementing electoral reform. Comments made by MPs suggest momentum on electoral reform is faltering and both the Government and the National Assembly are drifting towards inaction. End summary and comment.

Electoral Reform Could Disadvantage Shi'a

[1](#)2. (C) Moderate Shi'a MP Dr. Yousef Al-Zalzal claimed 30 out of the 50 MPs in the National Assembly opposed reducing the number of electoral districts and predicted the reform would falter in the next National Assembly session. Al-Zalzal said the Prime Minister told him in a recent meeting that the Government would not push for electoral reform and that impetus for the reform should come from the National Assembly. Al-Zalzal said he supported reducing the number of electoral districts, but heavily qualified his support by saying electoral reform should not disadvantage Kuwait's Shi'a minority. He criticized the two proposals to reduce the number of electoral districts introduced by Government during the last National Assembly session as discriminating against the Shi'a population. In a previous meeting with Poloff, Al-Zalzal predicted the Shi'a would lose two National Assembly seats if either of the Government's proposals was implemented. (Note: There are currently five Shi'a MPs. End note.)

Five Is Better Than Ten Is Better Than Twenty-Five

[1](#)3. (C) Many MPs said they preferred five districts to ten. Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee MP Mohammed Al-Sager, a liberal affiliated with the National Democratic Movement, said he preferred five districts, since even under a ten-district system some wealthy candidates could still afford to buy votes. He said he was skeptical any reduction would be implemented, noting the Government was not pushing for the reform. "If the Government was serious about political reform, it would reduce the number of electoral districts," Al-Sager concluded.

[1](#)4. (C) Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly Meshari Al-Anjari, an independent, liberal MP, also said he preferred five districts and echoed Al-Sager's complaint that the Government was not pushing hard enough for a reduction in the number of electoral districts. "Unless the Prime Minister backs the reform, it won't happen," Al-Anajri commented. Former Kuwait Democratic Forum member and liberal MP Ali Al-Rashed told the Ambassador that while he preferred five electoral districts, he thought ten was "politically more feasible."

[1](#)5. (C) Independent MP Ahmed AbdulMohsen Al-Mulaifi said he

supported reducing the number of electoral districts, but claimed "the Prime Minister is not behind it." Al-Mulaifi said the Prime Minister told him one of the two groups in the National Assembly whose support the Prime Minister needs on other issues is opposed to reducing the number of electoral districts; he did not specify who the two groups were. AbdulMohsen Taqi Muzaffar, the Secretary General of the Kuwait Democratic Forum, a liberal political association, told the Ambassador he hoped the number of electoral districts would be reduced, but he was "not optimistic." He questioned the Government's commitment to the reform, arguing that it will lose influence in the National Assembly if the number of electoral districts is reduced.

Interim Solution: Simpler Voter Registration System

16. (C) Al-Mulaifi told the Ambassador he planned to introduce legislation to automatically register voters based on their civil identification numbers, greatly simplifying the voter registration process and increasing the number of voters. (Note: Currently, eligible voters can only register to vote each February. End note.) He suggested this could be an interim step to reducing the number of electoral districts since it would achieve the same goal: increasing the number of voters per district and reducing electoral corruption. Al-Mulaifi said the simpler system would also facilitate the registration of female voters.

Who Benefits?

17. (C) Liberal, government-leaning, independent MP Jamal Al-Omar told the Ambassador he opposed a reduction in the number of electoral districts, arguing that Islamists, who are better funded and better organized than other political groups, would benefit most from the reform. He predicted Islamists would win three out of ten districts if the number of districts was reduced. Al-Omar added that Islamists would use the women's vote to their advantage. (Note: Islamist groups have publicly stated their intention to actively court the women's vote, despite their opposition to women's suffrage legislation. Some observers fear conservative females will be pressured by their male relatives to vote for Islamist candidates. End note.) Pressure to reduce the number of districts comes primarily from candidates who lost in the last election, Al-Omar commented. Noting that Kuwait is "not ready" for the reduction, Al-Omar said it would be better if voters could vote in any district they wanted.

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